

(U) "Ask Zelda!": Know-It-All Doesn't Know Much

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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(U) Editor's comment: The below article is unclassified in its entirety.



Dear Zelda,

"A 'helpful' co-worker, let's call her Malon, keeps offering unsolicited advice on personal matters. The trouble began on New Years: after discussing resolutions, I commented that no matter how hard I try, forcing a resolution is difficult. Malon somehow mistook this as a request for advice. Now she sits on high, ruling from her tower with some unhelpful 'helpful' advice. What's worse, now she has the confidence to tackle work-related issues, but is generally offering bad advice. How can I, without hurting feelings, explain that what she is doing is the opposite of help?"

Sincerely,
-- Helpless"

Dear Helpless,

There's nothing worse than a know-it-all who thinks she's qualified to dispense advice on any subject; and especially annoying when someone gives her her own column as a forum! ☺

When it comes to Malon's advice on personal matters, just ignore it. If she doesn't eventually stop dispensing advice, even though you clearly aren't following it, you can try one of the following:

- Tell her that when you made the comment you were simply making an observation and not looking for a solution.
- Say, "Thanks, Malon. I know you're trying to be helpful, but that just wouldn't work for me."
- "I appreciate your trying to help, but I have a new [psychic advisor/financial counselor/neighbor/girlfriend] who is really wise and I've found [his/her] advice perfect for me."
- "Really? That's an interesting idea. Have you ever tried it yourself? And how did that work out for you?" (This must be said without the slightest trace of sarcasm to avoid hurting her feelings.)
- Stop sharing your problems at work (I mean that in the nicest possible way ☺) or preface it with, "I'm not looking for advice, but..."
- If her advice is given in a group setting, throw it out to the others -- "Do the rest of you find that to be true?" or "What do the others think about that solution?"
- If her unhelpful advice falls into a particular category, for example it's always stuff she has no experience with, you could gently point that out to her. "Malon, I notice when you give advice on baking, it's great. We all appreciate the tips from your years as the White House pastry chef. But since you don't have any children or grandchildren, your parenting advice isn't as appreciated."
- Try to find a helpful nugget in what she says. "I wouldn't be able to train for a marathon because I have bad knees, but that walking club you mentioned might be a possibility." Note:

this won't discourage her from giving advice, but it's a way to let her down easy if you want to disagree with her suggestions.

If she is giving out bad work-related advice and others think she is knowledgeable about these matters, it would be best to take the gullible ones aside and tactfully point out to them that, although Malon is trying to be helpful, she doesn't have the background to provide sound guidance in these matters and your organization's tech director would be a much better person to advise them.

You might want to consider one other thing: although you find Malon's advice unhelpful, there may be people in your office for whom it is right.

Tempted to Give Advice?

It's very tempting to offer advice -- so much easier to fix someone else's problems than your own -- but it's a tricky business. People are biased by their personal experiences and what's right for one person may not be right for another. Here are some guidelines for those tempted to dispense advice.

- Try to determine if the person just wants a sympathetic ear. Often what seems like an invitation to fix a situation is really just a request for empathy. If you can't figure out which, ask; or try sympathy first (such as patting them on the back and saying "You must be a saint to put up with that"). After you have been reasonably supportive, if they ask, "But what would you do?" then feel free to advise away.
- Don't give unsolicited advice, and don't give advice outside your area(s) of expertise. If the person wants your opinion anyway, caveat it ("I know nothing about cars, but I personally like the green one because it matches your eyes.").
- Sometimes a person is looking for you to validate their decision. If this appears to be the case and you would have made different choices, you can always say, "I might have done it differently, but it appears you've really thought this through and this is the right decision for you. I hope it works out well for you."
- Most importantly -- don't be upset if the recipient doesn't do what you suggest, even if they did ask your opinion.

-Zella
